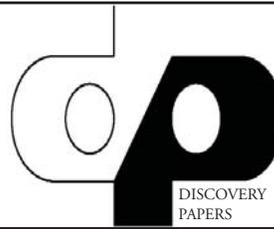


IN LOVE, IN THE SPRINGTIME

SERIES: FAIR AS THE MOON, BRIGHT AS THE SUN



Catalog No. 5307
Song of Songs 2:8-3:5
3rd Message
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Three times in the Song of Songs this important warning is repeated: “Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires.” The bride in the poem addresses the warning to the daughters of Jerusalem, who (in this context) are probably young women without adult life experience. And while the interpretation of the warning is debated, I am convinced that it means this: Do not fan the flames of sexual desire and infatuation until they can serve the purpose God intended for them.

Consider this recollection by Eugene Peterson:

“The consultation had been arranged on the telephone so that when she walked into my study it was a first meeting. Her opening statement was, “Well I guess you want to know all about my sex life—that’s what they always want to know.” I answered, “If that is what you want to talk about I’ll listen. What I would really be interested in finding out, though, is your prayer life.” She didn’t think I was serious, but I was. I was interested in the details of her prayer life for the same reason that her psychiatrists had been interested in the details of her sex life - to find out how she handled intimate relationships. I had to settle for the details of her sex life at that time. Sex was the only language she knew for describing relationships of intimacy. At a later time, when she came to understand herself in relation to a personal God, she also learned to use the language of prayer.”¹

This woman illustrates one of the reasons to heed the warning about too much sexual experience, gained too soon. She knew the rudimentary speech of her body, but she did not know the language of her heart.

A Meeting Remembered

So with this warning in mind (found in 2:7 and 3:5 and bookending the text we are considering here), let’s look at chapter 2, verses 8-13. We should picture adults addressing a group of younger people. You might think of a youth camp at which a married couple is giving a sex talk to a group of students.

BRIDE

Listen! My lover!

**Look! Here he comes,
leaping across the mountains,
bounding over the hills.**

My lover is like a gazelle or a young stag.

**Look! There he stands behind our wall,
gazing through the windows,
peering through the lattice.**

**My lover spoke and said to me,
“Arise, my darling,**

**my beautiful one, and come with me.
See! The winter is past;
the rains are over and gone.
Flowers appear on the earth;
the season of singing has come,
the cooing of doves
is heard in our land.
The fig tree forms its early fruit;
the blossoming vines spread their fragrance.
Arise, come, my darling;
my beautiful one, come with me.”**

It does little good to simply lecture people (young ones especially) about what they ought to do; you need to show some understanding of their circumstances. And so this bride is telling of an occasion early in her life when she began to discover the power of romance. Notice that, in these verses, the man does not speak in his own voice. Instead, the woman quotes him; these are her memories of a time when they were both young.

We are not sufficiently familiar with the time and culture of this young couple to grasp all that we read here. However, I think we can understand the basic dynamic of the events being described and recast them in a way nearer to our world.

A boy grows up with little regard for all things feminine. But at some point he realizes he doesn’t want to be with his family or hang out with his buddies. All he wants is to be with the girl he can’t stop thinking about. So off he goes, running, turning cartwheels, full of enthusiasm and confidence.

But when he gets to her house, he doesn’t know what to do, and his adolescent bravado crashes into his adolescent insecurity. So he stands outside the wall, peering through the lattice, hoping somebody will notice him. She is also interested, aware of his approach (“Look, here he comes”). And finally he calls out an invitation to her (hoping his voice doesn’t crack): “Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, and come with me.” The winter is over, the flowers are beautiful, and she is as fascinated with him as he is with her. This is how the bride remembers the day that the young man, now her husband (“my lover”), first came looking for her.

There is something winsome and beautiful about this. And as we move to verse 14, we can still imagine the couple telling their story of young love at the youth retreat, but now they are speaking in real time, and the groom speaks in his own voice:

GROOM

**My dove in the clefts of the rock,
in the hiding places on the mountainside,
show me your face,
let me hear your voice;
for your voice is sweet,
and your face is lovely.**

Then, I think they both say in verse 15:

BRIDE & GROOM

**Catch for us the foxes,
the little foxes
that ruin the vineyards,
our vineyards that are in bloom.**

And in verses 16-17, the bride speaks again:

BRIDE

**My lover is mine and I am his;
he browses among the lilies.
Until the day breaks
and the shadows flee,
turn, my lover,
and be like a gazelle
or like a young stag
on the rugged hills.**

The woman has painted for her young listeners a picture of what it was like when she and her lover were young. Now the man says to his wife in the presence of all (verse 14), “You are as beautiful to me now as you were the day I first saw you. I would love to spend a day again with you in the hills away from everything, just the two of us.” And in doing so, he is showing the young listeners a relationship that is growing ever more beautiful with time. Those who begin well (not too much, too soon) can look forward to a lifetime of delighting in one another.

Let’s skip verse 15 for a moment and look at what the woman says next. “My lover is mine and I am his.” Our relationship is secure. We belong together. Everything we experience grows out of the certainty of our connectedness. The next thing she says is difficult to interpret, but I think she is speaking in somewhat guarded language about their physical relationship. “He browses among the lilies. Until the day breaks, and the shadows flee, turn, my lover, and be like a gazelle or like a young stag on the rugged hills.” “Rugged hills” can also be translated “separated hills,” and has been interpreted as referring to her breasts. It is sort of like she is saying with a laugh in her voice and a wink in her eye, “Later tonight I have other plans for all that ‘young stag’ energy.” And in witnessing this exchange, the young people see that first romance can mature into comfortable, joyful adult love.

Verse 15 says, “Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom.” They have been talking about their marriage and their appreciation of each other, but here they are saying that

they have made choices to deal with small problems before they become big problems. It is important for their young listeners to hear that marriage is not just one good experience followed by another. There are times of disagreement and misunderstanding. Problems arise, and we want to deal with them before they become large and threatening.

A Warning Repeated

Chapter 3 begins with a dream scene – a nightmare that persisted (half waking, half sleeping) “all night long” – and in verses 1-5 the bride tells her listeners of this experience.

BRIDE

All night long on my bed

**I looked for the one my heart loves;
I looked for him but did not find him.**

**I will get up now and go about the city,
through its streets and squares;**

I will search for the one my heart loves.

So I looked for him but did not find him.

The watchmen found me

as they made their rounds in the city.

“Have you seen the one my heart loves?”

Scarcely had I passed them

when I found the one my heart loves.

I held him and would not let him go

**till I had brought him to my mother’s
house,**

to the room of the one who conceived me.

Daughters of Jerusalem, I charge you

by the gazelles and by the does of the field:

Do not arouse or awaken love

until it so desires.

The bride is describing the pain of losing someone to whom she has given her heart. Her experience is only a bad dream and it ends with the relief of reunion. But it is a dream that teaches a lesson she is passing on to her young friends. Love can break your heart, and few experiences are harder to bear. Being abandoned by a spouse is described here as a nightmare. Heed this advice: choose wisely and don’t get swept away (love awakened prematurely) by the wrong person. Don’t fall for someone who lacks the ability to stay true to a marriage.

And so we come to the end of this youth retreat. The young people have been taught and, it is hoped, will make wise choices as a result.

But the call to begin well regarding sex and love has limited usefulness. Most of us made those first choices long ago, and most of us wish we could undo the mistakes we’ve made along the way. The warning is to not awaken love prematurely, but what if I am past that point now? Is there anything helpful here for me?

At Boston University, Donna Freitas teaches a class on

spirituality and sexuality in American youth culture. She surveyed over 2500 students at public and private colleges and universities nationwide about a range of sexual behavior, and she observes, "Not a single person at these schools said that their peers valued saving sex for marriage, and only 7% said that they felt that their friends wanted to reserve sex for committed, loving relationships."² The reading list for her students included evangelical "dating manuals" such as *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, by Joshua Harris, and *Real Sex*, by Lauren Winner. Freitas notes, "[My class] seemed shocked that somewhere in America there are entire communities of people their age who really do "save themselves" until marriage, who engage in old-fashioned dating with flowers and dinner and maybe a kiss goodnight. They reacted as if these authors describe a wonderful fantasy land."³ What is striking is not that college students are drawn to sex but rather the disconnection of physical experience from everything else.

Speaking from Experience

The Song of Songs is imbedded in a world view that seem like "fantasy land" to modern college students. The caution, "don't awaken love too soon" is crucial for those who are still young, but does this text have any use for those past that milestone? What does it offer to those who are in difficult relationships? What does it say to those single adults?

I believe that the example of teaching others is as valuable as the lessons taught on our imaginary youth retreat. Relationships exist in community. We benefit from the voices and experiences of others. We may not be able to keep up with the latest shift in youth culture, but we know the big story. We know the faithfulness of God, and we can speak of it from our own experience.

This pattern applies to all ages and life circumstances. In Christian community we seek and offer help from one another. Remember our earlier quote from Eugene Peterson? To the woman who thought that sex was the only possible language for intimacy, he said, "OK, I'll listen. But I can tell you about another language, a language of hearing and knowing God. I can teach you the language of prayer. I will hear what you have to say, but I have something better to offer you."

Sex, marriage, relationship confusion, unrealized hopes, discovery, loss, and reunion are not off limits for polite conversation. We must not avoid 'awkward conversations' when speaking up would be life-giving.

Finally, let me say a word to those who are not in a healthy, burden-bearing Christian community. Some of you may not know who to ask for help, where you can be taken seriously and listened to without rejection. Be

certain that we all have a heavenly Father who wants his children to call Him Abba, Papa, Daddy. He invites us to come to Him for help. A father's blessing is powerful in shaping how we experience love, sex and marriage. Whatever else is true of our history and circumstances, all who know Christ have a loving Father. Jesus taught us to pray that our needs would be supplied, our sins forgiven, that temptation would be avoided and evil overcome. He taught us to pray to our Father:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

NOTES

¹ Peterson, Eugene. *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 27-28

² Freitas, Donna. "Sex Education." *WSJ.com*, April 4, 2008. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB120728447818789307.html>

³ *Ibid.*